

Philip Handler 1917–1981

Philip Handler was an institution in his own right on the Washington—indeed the world—science scene for many years. After long service on the National Science Board, the policy-making group for the National Science Foundation, he was president of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and chairman of its operating arm, the National Research Council (NRC), for 12 years before retiring last July. Less than six months later, he has died at 64, a victim of cancer.

There is no doubt that Handler relished his 12 years at the NAS helm. At an academy council dinner in his honor he said, "I have had an absolutely glorious time. Opportunities for service which are at the same time warm, loving, rich experiences are very rare. I have been very fortunate and deeply, highly privileged by all of you."

Such a personal expression of feeling seemed to reflect on his overall views on science. In an interview with C&EN, the last he gave to the press as NAS president (C&EN, July 20, 1981, page 38), he said, "Science is a human endeavor. It is about people in the end. It can't be held out there as some strange objective thing that doesn't relate to the world in which people function. It must not. It would be a terrible mistake."

Handler's career at NAS and NRC reflected his conviction that the stature of science, both as an intellectual exercise and as an institution with influence for the public good, depends ultimately on its integrity.

For instance, he came to NRC with a plan in hand to enhance its performance as a science adviser to the government by eliminating bias in council committees and tightening the peer review process for its reports. And although he was not a hip shooter, he was always ready, even eager, to go to bat when he perceived science as being under improper pressures.

In his last annual report to NAS he spoke out strongly. In commenting on Administration-proposed cuts in the NSF budget he wrote, "I must confess a sense of outrage with the notion that [the Office of Management & Budget], rather than appropriate scientists, may dictate which fields of scholarly endeavor are acceptable or important to NSF. Moreover we natural scientists would be ill-advised to stand aside and allow the social scientists to carry the battle. The entirety of science is a seamless web. If the government's science budget can be fashioned by such ideological behavior, which science will be the next to suffer political attack?"

He went on, "If social science can be ordained by OMB to be outside the federal ken, then the way is paved. Creationists and Right to Lifers and the Moral Majority will seek to have education concerning evolution and human reproduction expunged from the secondary schools while exercising pressure to secure removal from appropriations to NSF and NIH of any funds that might be used for research on evolution or reproductive biology"—topics very near to his heart as a most distinguished biologist. For almost 20 years before joining NAS he was chairman of the biochemistry department at Duke University.

He saw science as a seamless web in the international sense also. He perceived restraints on scientists in any nation to pursue their craft and freely communicate their results as an attack on all of science. This put him in the vanguard of efforts to try to mitigate the harassment and persecution by Soviet authorities of Andrei Sakharov and other dissident Soviet scientists.

There was no stronger foe of the anti-intellectual and antiscience attitudes that seem rife in the land these days than Handler—no stronger advocate of the contributions of science to betterment of the human condition both today and in the future. But he was sensitive to some of the difficulties that science and its applications have helped to bring.

For instance, his concern over the nuclear arms race was intense. He saw U.S. policies on nuclear weapons as the central fact of our national life and was convinced that the scientific community must involve itself in an extensive examination of such policies. His principal regret on leaving the academy was that it removed him from a central role in such an examination. However, his legacy lives on. This month in Washington, D.C., the committee he established to look into arms control and international security will meet for the second time with a counterpart group of Soviet scientists.

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Editor